

## Tories appear to regard attempt to kill long-gun registry as lost cause

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OTTAWA - The Conservative government appears to be acknowledging its attempt to kill the long-gun registry is a lost cause.

Despite introducing an unusual Senate bill to great fanfare earlier this month, an official in the office of government Senate Leader Marjorie LeBreton says there's no timetable for a vote on Bill S-5 in the Liberal-dominated upper chamber.

And Liberals say the whole point of the exercise was political posturing rather than serious legislative change.

"The Liberals are opposed to it, so it's unlikely to move very much right now," Eli Schuster, LeBreton's communications adviser, said Monday when asked about the status of S-5.

Asked why the government would introduce a bill it had no intention of pushing to a vote, Schuster abruptly ended the conversation.

"I think the Conservatives are bound and determined to at least appear to be trying to get rid of the registry," said Liberal MP Mark Holland, the party's public-safety critic.

"They've got a problem with their base and they're trying to rev them up, trying to pretend they're killing the registry without really making a concerted effort to kill it."

Real or contrived, the government initiative is raising alarms.

A group representing front-line police officers came out swinging Monday against the Senate bill, saying it will compromise public safety.

The Canadian Police Association added that C-301, a private member's bill proposed by Tory MP Garry Breitkreuz, is even worse.

"We ... consider the licensing of firearms owners and the registration of firearms to be a valuable public-safety tool for front-line police officers," CPA president Charles Momy says in a letter to Liberal Leader Michael Ignatieff.

"It would be irresponsible to suspend or abandon any element of this program now that it is starting to deliver the intended results. ... Bill S-5 and Bill C-301 will compromise public safety."

Ignatieff has said Liberals will not support either bill, which virtually guarantees they'll never be enacted.

Until recently, the minority Conservative government had been backing Breitzkreuz's bill, which would weaken controls on machine guns, in addition to scrapping the gun registry.

But amid criticism that the MP's bill went too far, the government proposed its own legislation via the odd route of the Senate, where Liberals hold an overwhelming majority. The government bill focuses strictly on abolition of the gun registry.

"I don't see it being approved by the Senate," said Holland.

"By the same token, we do have Mr. Brietkreuz's bill and the government will continue to try to find ways to stoke these flames and try to rile up their base.

"So I don't think we can just sit on the sidelines and just presume we don't need to worry about this thing."

Tories have long contended that the registry is a waste of taxpayers' money and does nothing to combat crime.

But in his letter, Momy says police officers used the registry an average of 9.4 times a day last year. Among other things, he says, the registry is helpful in alerting officers to the likely presence of guns when responding to domestic violence calls or other volatile situations.

He says the registry also "discourages casual gun ownership," prompting people to get rid of unused or unwanted firearms. And it encourages those who do own guns to abide by safe storage laws and report thefts.

Critics of the registry have characterized it as penalizing law-abiding long-gun owners, primarily hunters and rural residents.

But Momy notes that of 15 police officers fatally shot in Canada during the last decade, 13 were killed with rifles or shotguns. Moreover, he says, long guns are used two times more frequently than handguns in spousal homicides and five times more in suicides.

Being able to identify ownership of firearms can be crucial in investigating and prosecuting suspects, he said.

For instance, Momy said a registered rifle found at the scene of the 2005 murder of four RCMP officers in Mayerthorpe, Alta., was part of the evidence that ultimately led to the arrest and conviction of two men for manslaughter.